In *Knowledge and the Ends of Empire*, Ian W. Campbell probes the complex and tangled relationship between knowledge and imperial power, a subject much debated in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, among other works.¹ Moving away from the research focus on the classic disciplines of orientology that Said’s work first inspired, Campbell turns to the more general process of imperial state-building to investigate “the conditions of knowledge production as an administrative tool and as a social process” (p. 4), a topic subject to much study by historians of South Asia but less explored by historians of the Russian empire. Campbell’s specific focus is the Kazakh steppe, as it came under Russian imperial rule during the period 1731–1917, and a group of Kazakh interlocutors with the Russian imperial state, whom he labels “intermediaries.”

In Campbell’s retelling, as the Russian empire sought to bring the Kazakh steppe more closely under its purview in the 19th century, it confronted an increasing need for knowledge about the steppe and its inhabitants. This need created an opportunity for Kazakhs who possessed some claim to that knowledge to influence policy. But the linkages between the knowledge that these Kazakhs produced and the implementation of policy were never straight-forward, Campbell finds, and he carefully traces the ways that personal connections and changing state priorities, among other factors, influenced the way that this knowledge was deployed. By the late 19th century, as St. Petersburg became increasingly focused on turning the Kazakh steppe into an area of peasant settlement, the space for Kazakhs to influence policy began to close, Campbell argues. His book concludes with an examination of the Central Asian

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revolt of 1916, an event he sees in part as embodying the Russian empire’s failure to engage with Kazakh intermediaries.

Campbell’s book rests upon impressive research in Russian and Kazakh archives and libraries, using both Russian and Kazakh-language sources. Campbell’s meticulous use of Kazakh-language sources is particularly noteworthy, given that the field of modern Central Asian history has at times tended to rely heavily on Russian-language sources to the exclusion of native-language sources. By analyzing sources in Kazakh such as the periodical press and literary works, Campbell brings to light the ways that Kazakhs shaped the character of Russian imperial rule on the steppe, thereby contributing to a broader literature that has highlighted the contributions of minority groups to the Russian imperial state.

The book is wide-ranging and will be read with interest by historians of science, environmental historians and those seeking to understand the Russian empire in comparative context. Engaging with a large body of secondary literature on other colonial empires, Campbell finds that the Russian empire’s weakness, relative to its peers, made it especially reliant on the contributions of non-Russians, such as the Kazakhs that he details in his book.

While the book might be read as a meditation on the relationship between knowledge and imperial power, it also provides a wealth of new details about Russian imperial rule in Central Asia. In Campbell’s account, St. Petersburg conquered the Kazakh steppe without any clear idea of what they were going to do with it. Officials had little information on the practices of nomadic Kazakhs and a poorly developed understanding of the steppe’s semi-arid environment, which differed markedly from that of European Russia. Prefiguring debates that would emerge during the Soviet era, Russian imperial experts and their Kazakh interlocutors discussed whether nomadic Kazakhs should take up settled life and how and if the steppe might be transformed into an agrarian landscape. But St. Petersburg’s increasing focus on questions of economic modernization, as well as a creeping Islamophobia, combined to sideline the contributions of many Kazakhs and turn the tide in favor of a policy of large-scale peasant settlement of the Kazakh steppe. It was in part local dissatisfaction with this policy that fueled the explosive 1916 revolt in nomadic areas.

The book is an engaging read, but at times I wanted further clarification of two key terms on which the book’s argument rests, “intermediaries” and “knowledge.” Campbell does not offer an extended discussion of how he defines “Kazakh intermediaries” as a group. His declared focus is on those Kazakhs who offered “knowledge” to the tsarist state, which he, following C.A. Bayly, defines as “organized and taxonomized material,” in opposition to “informa-